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CHAPTER FOUR

Ritual Structure

I. THE CHARACTER OF RELIGION

A TEXT-BOOK knowledge of the religious lore of India, and an acquaintance with her ancient classics and their modern expositions will hardly give us a true picture of the actual religious beliefs, thoughts, feelings and practices of the people now living in the countryside. A classification of their religious beliefs and ritual is not an easy task. Folklore and myths, religious teachings of saint-poets, and contacts with persons having knowledge of scriptures and popular religious books have all influenced their religious ideology, and consequently their religion is a mixture of animism, animatism and polytheism, with the occasional appearance of monotheism also. To these must be added a living faith in spirits, ghosts, demons, witches and magic. The complex of all these diverse factors constitutes the picture of the supernatural world as it is understood by the people in the countryside. Tenets of classical Hinduism having an all-India spread are mingled with the regional religious beliefs and forms of worship current among the Hindus of the Deccan plateau. Several cults and worships of a purely local nature add further to the complexity of the beliefs and ritual system of the community. A wide variety of cults is observed by the family, some by the village as a whole; and still others by individual caste groups.

What is the attitude of the individual towards religion in general? And what is his attitude towards the rituals and cults organized by the different units of the community? An attempt to answer these questions will greatly help our understanding of the character of religion as accepted and practised by the people.

Shamirpet is predominantly a Hindu village. The Muslim sec-

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The Muslim section of the population belongs to the Sunni sect and follows the religious pattern laid down in the Koran as interpreted by the founders of this sect. A devout Muslim is expected to offer prayers five times a day. In Shamirpet this would be the exception rather than the general rule. Some of the Muslim elders offer prayers twice a day, some only once and the rest are contented with their weekly prayers on Friday. The Mulla, the Muslim priest in the village, is the only person who offers the prescribed prayers every day. Fasting during the month of Ramzan is undertaken by a very large number of Muslims, but those maintaining it without a break until the end of the month would not total even a quarter of that number. The Muslims have a high degree of community-consciousness, but in Shamirpet it does not find expression in the form of intense religious devotion among the adherents of the Islamic faith.

With the exception of the Brahmin and the Komti castes, the Hindus have no fixed time for daily worship. The number of people who visit a temple or shrine every day is negligible. But festivals and ceremonies are observed with unfailing regularity. Otherwise the gods are remembered only at times of disease or difficulty. As a rule, only some of the elderly people devote themselves to 'the daily duty of remembering the creator'; the younger people 'have much else to do'. They participate in ceremonies, partake of the festival feasts, and assemble to listen to the reading of the holy books and to the recitation of mythological legends by professionals when they happen to visit the village. The tasks of remembrance and repentance are postponed for old age. Among both men and women, only the elders seem to talk about 'the change of times' and 'the decline in the religious attitudes and ethical standards of the people'. In the everyday thought and speech of the younger generation there is very little of religion; and little conscious effort at seeking any deep religious experience or thrill is to be found among them. In the life of the community under observation, we noticed only two exceptions to this. One of these is the *Urs*, a semi-religious fair, commemorating Jalal Miyan, a local Muslim divine with some reputation for being a holy man. This fair is sponsored by the Muslims but is largely attended by the Hindus also. The second is the annual worship of a village goddess organized by the village. On both these occasions several people are temporarily possessed by the spirit

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of Jalal Miyan or by one of the goddesses. Going into a trance these people speak for the spirit which possesses them. The other people who are present there make offerings to them, seek solutions of their pressing problems and difficulties, and request them to remedy their ills and worries. Considerable enthusiasm is in evidence among them at this time. With these exceptions there is very little religious thought, talk or worship in normal life.

However, both Hindus and Muslims have a degree of fatalism and demonstrate a spirit of resignation towards predestined facts ordained for them by the supernatural forces of the world beyond. People can often be heard to remark, 'If it is written in our fate, we must submit to it. Human effort cannot alter the will of God. What is predestined must have its course.' But this fatalism makes its appearance only when the people have tried their best to solve the problem and having spared no effort still find themselves no nearer a solution. Coupled with this concept of fate is the Hindu doctrine of *karma*. According to this concept, which takes for granted the phenomenon of the transmigration of the soul and its re-birth, our actions in the past life determine the character of our present life, and our actions in this life will determine the character of our future life. The village people clearly reconcile and synthesize these two views into a practical precept: the course of our present life is largely predestined on the basis of our acts in the past life, but by acting 'rightly' in this life we can materially influence the course of our life after death.

The rural ethic lays great emphasis on 'acting rightly', that is on the observance of traditional norms; because it is the only way to achieve happiness and prosperity in this life, and more than that to ensure the destiny of the soul after death. The problem of the future plays a very significant part in the ordering of life. Both Hindus and Muslims believe that death is not the end; there is something beyond it. Both attach great importance to the destiny of the soul after death. While the Muslim expects to remain in his grave until the Resurrection, when on the Day of Judgement he will be assigned to heaven (*jannat*) or hell (*jahannum*) according to his deeds, for the Hindu life is practically an unending process. After death one either goes to heaven (*swarga*) or to hell (*narka*), or one takes re-birth. Depending on one's actions in the past life, one may be born into one of the castes higher or lower than one's caste in the previous life, or even into some other lower species

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bath or wash is necessary to remove the impurity caused by the act. Non-observance of these rules will have a polluting effect; and according to the nature and degree of pollution purificatory rites will have to be undertaken.

Belief in ghosts and spirits is universal. They are feared and propitiated. Strange mystical power pervading certain objects is recognized, and fetishes and amulets are eagerly sought. Witchcraft is often suspected, and three or four people in the community are believed to possess magical powers.

Clearly, Hinduism as it is practised in the village is not the Hinduism of the classical philosophical systems of India, for it possesses neither the metaphysical heights nor the abstract content of the latter. It is a religion of fasts, feasts and festivals, in which prescribed rituals cover all the major crises of life. Worship and propitiation of gods and spirits follow the annual round of festivals and the ritual of the human life-cycle. Disease and difficulty may also necessitate invoking assistance from these sources.

In early childhood religious instruction through legendary tales and anecdotes exercises its influence on the developing mind of the child in whose thoughts and world of fancy these ideas linger on. Youth brings in its wake a more worldly and materialistic outlook towards life and its pleasures. Thoughts are turned to religion when the evening of life approaches, partly to postpone the final moment of departure as long as it could be, and partly to ensure the future lying beyond the point of death. Analysis of life-histories reveals that spiritualism cannot be said to be the keynote in the life of the community; far from it the religion appears to be a practical one. It strengthens and fortifies the individual and the group in situations where technical competence and practical intelligence are of no avail, and at the same time acts as a bond of cohesion for maintaining the structural unity of the society.

2: BELIEF: GODS AND DEITIES

The Muslims believe in one God, and follow the way of life laid down for them by their Prophet. They all belong to the Sunni division, and as such differ from the Shias and other splinter divisions of Islam in respect of the interpretation of their holy book as well as in several details of belief, ritual and ceremonial. Almost all the Muslims of Shamirpet have been converted to Islam from Hinduism in the course of the last four or five generations.

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795 Hinduism in the course of the last four or five generations. They
776 do not believe in any of the gods of the Hindu Trinity, nor in any of the later incarnations; but they share with the Hindus a living faith in the existence of malevolent ghosts, spirits and witches. They participate with the rest of the community in village ceremonies and sacrifices. To ward off cholera, plague and smallpox, they too think that it is necessary to propitiate the local deities and goddesses.

779 Village Hinduism is not easy to describe. It is an extremely
184 elastic religion, and within its all-India framework admits of a
614] considerable degree of regional and local variation. In his *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India*, M. N. Srinivas has introduced the useful concept of 'spread', and split up village Hinduism into 'All India Hinduism', 'Peninsular Hinduism', 'Regional Hinduism', and 'Local Hinduism'.

776 The people of Shamirpet worship all the major gods of the
171 Hindu pantheon, but many of their cults distinctly belong to the complex of ritual that can be regarded as peculiar to peninsular India. Some of these observances present variations which are confined only to this particular village.

The Hindu concept of a Trinity, comprising three manifestations of divinity—Brahma, the creator; Vishnu, the sustainer; and Shiva, the destroyer—has an all-India spread, and in common with the Hindus of the other parts of India the residents of Shamirpet principally worship either Shiva, or Vishnu and his
771 numerous incarnations—particularly Rama and Krishna. The
171 concepts of soul (*atma*), of the reckoning of an individual's actions and their consequences on his present and future life (the concept of *karma*), of laying emphasis on the right ordering of life and on doing what is just and moral (concept of *dharma*), of heaven and hell, and finally of the transmigration of the soul and its re-birth also have such an all-India spread; although there are significant regional and local variations in their details. Finally, the nature of rituals connected with the human life-cycle has been very considerably influenced by the Sanskritic ritual of all-India Hinduism, but it still continues to be characterized by some distinctive regional peculiarities.

778 All over India some rivers are regarded as sacred, and legends and cults grow around them. The Godavari is among the rivers whose sanctity and importance have been enhanced by prominent

½ [The Muslims — Analyst]

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5. RELIGION IN DISEASE AND DIFFICULTY

In the two preceding sections an attempt has been made to present the ritual cycle of the community covering firstly the festivals and ceremonies within a normal calendar year, and secondly, the rites and observances concerning the major crises of life. These cycles are rigidly observed, as their observance constitutes the *dharma* or the appropriate way of life, and leads to the prosperity and well-being of the family as well as to a desirable future for the individual after death. With the exception of these festivals, under normal conditions of life, there is very little spiritual or devotional activity in the community. But persistent difficulties, uncommon diseases, and frequent deaths turn the people's thoughts to supernatural factors; events are interpreted in terms of supernatural interferences, and are sought to be remedied by magico-religious procedures.

Most of the common diseases are interpreted as a 'fault in the physical system', and are treated with herbal medicines or modern drugs obtained from the dispensary. Common colds, headaches, fever, stomach-ache, scabies, gonorrhoea and syphilis are regarded as natural diseases, and an effort is made to cure them with medicines. But persistent headaches, intermittent fevers, continued stomach disorders, rickets and other wasting diseases among children, menstrual troubles, repeated abortions, etc., are attributed to supernatural forces. In all such cases medicinal cures as well as propitiation of the 'unseen powers' are attempted simultaneously. Similarly, such calamities as the failure of crops, total blindness, repeated failures in undertakings, deaths of children in quick succession and too many deaths in the family within a short time are taken to indicate 'misfortune' and 'the handiwork of malevolent supernatural forces'. Smallpox, cholera and plague are always attributed to the wrath of various goddesses. For these diseases worship is regarded as the only remedy; and no medicines are administered to the patients.

What are the major factors that cause these difficulties, distresses and deaths? In the village community they are attributed to one or more of the following:

(i) The wrath of ancestor-spirits.
(ii) Unfavourable stars.
(iii) Ghosts and spirits.
(iv) The wrath of gods.
(v) Black magic and witchcraft.